

Fish consumption amongst poor people in Bangladesh: Effects of gender, location and wealth class

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Poverty and malnutrition remain largely a rural phenomenon in Bangladesh and huge discrepancy exists across economic groups and gender. This article presents the fish consumption status of the poorer section of the community. The average per capita per day fish consumptions were 34 g among village households and 26 g among slum households which are lower than the national average of 37 g and international standard requirement of 49g. Women and girl children consumed the least fish in the households.

Fish and Bangladesh

Bangladesh has made good progress in reducing poverty from 59 percent in 1991-92 to about 40 percent in 2000 (Anonymous 2005). Nevertheless, poverty remains largely a rural phenomenon, 63 million people are in hard-core or extreme poverty. As a result, malnutrition in Bangladesh remains among the highest in the world, and more severe than that of most other developing countries. Nutritional status should be improved to address the malnutrition of adolescent girls and mothers, because if mothers are malnourished, their children are much more likely to have low birth weight, and to remain malnourished throughout their lives.



Fig. 1. Mainly women and children suffer from anaemia and vitamin A deficiency in Bangladesh

Fish is an important contributor of animal protein and other essential nutrients to reduce malnutrition in urban and rural areas. Fish provide the main source of animal protein in Bangladesh. They form an intrinsic and essential part of Bangladesh's cultural traditions. In the past, the rural poor used to catch small fish from ditches, canals and flood plains at little or no cost. This is no longer possible due to environmental degradation. At present national average fish consumption is about 37 g per capita per day (13 kg per year) (DoF 2003). However, this statistic about average consumption

has been drawn in a very simplified way from dividing the total fish production by total population of Bangladesh. The gender, wealth-class and locality have altogether been ignored in the process. There is likely to be a huge gap among male-female, rich-poor and rural-urban people in per capita fish consumption. Traditionally, women and girl children are the least privileged group to eat fish in rural households. Therefore, to find out the facts of gender, age, and wealth-class fish consumption in Bangladesh this study was designed to look at the fish consumption status of the poorer section of the community.

This will provide the real scenario to policy makers, NGOs, and national and international donors.

The Survey

The present survey was carried out during January-June, 2004 in three villages of Netrokona district, three slums of Mymensingh and three slums of Dhaka. A number of survey techniques involving participatory, qualitative and quantitative elements with 90 households covering different levels of socioeconomic status were conducted. Fish consumption was surveyed four times in the households during the 6-month period using a 5-day recall method.

Socioeconomic status

The respondents were involved in diversified professions from farmer to rickshaw puller, from day labourer to carpenter and from domestic help to petty businessman. Monthly income varied widely Tk. 500 to 8,000 (USD 1 = BDT 65 during the survey). Only villagers of Netrokona owned crop land and ponds in addition to their homestead.

Fish consumption

Almost all people in the surveyed households of Netrakona and Dhaka ate 3 meals a day, however, a considerable number of people in the slums of Mymensingh ate 2 meals a day. Most people ate rice in all their meals, however, some people, mainly in slums, ate bread during breakfast. The average per capita per day fish consumption was 34, 24 and 28 g for the surveyed households in Netrokona, Mymensingh and Dhaka, respectively.

There is a significant difference among three surveyed areas where the villagers in Netrokona consumed more fish than the other two areas. Slum dwellers in Dhaka consumed slightly more fish than the people of the slums in Mymensingh. Within households, the head of the household always consumed

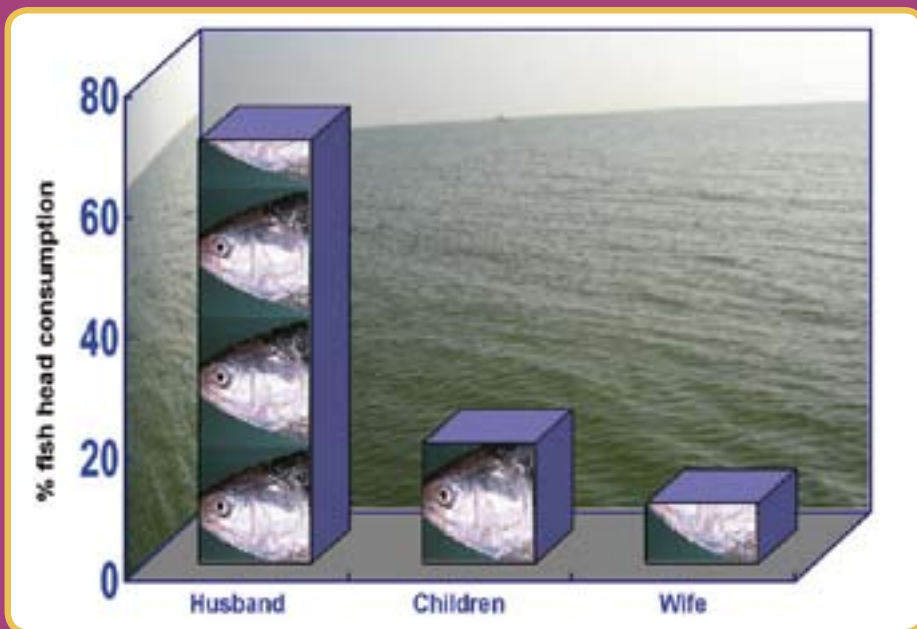


Fig. 3. Fish head - the most popular part for consumption

more fish followed by the boy children and the female members consumed the least. Unlike in developed societies, fish-heads were the most demanded part (especially of big fish) and in 70% of cases when a large fish was purchased or caught, the fish-heads were eaten by the head of the household.

Fish consumption in all three study areas of Bangladesh was lower than both the national average of 37 g and international requirements of 49 g. Therefore, on average, the people in survey areas were eating around 16g less fish than the standard. Furthermore, the women of poor households were eating far less than the national average. The general observation is that, increasingly the poor are eating less and less fish and women in rural households are particularly getting even less.

The main species consumed were Thai catfish (pangus), silver carp, common carp (all are exotic in Bangladesh), small prawn, small indigenous species (SIS) and carp

fingerlings. All the people in the surveyed area liked indigenous, tasty, valuable fish rather than exotic species. However, poor people could not afford valuable fish. Species diversity of consumed fish was greater in the case of villagers than the slum dwellers. Slum dwellers consumed low quality, cheap fish and lots of dried and fermented fish.

Conclusion

There is a huge gap of fish consumption between the national average and at different levels of society. Certain groups of poor are vulnerable to certain diseases due to lack of fish protein. Open water fisheries require some measures to protect the rich biodiversity as well as the rights of the poor to access those water bodies so that they can eat fish regularly. Traditional carp polyculture systems now require the inclusion of the SIS in Bangladesh. These steps will ensure the availability of small fish to the poor and vulnerable for household consumption. The country's policymakers should take necessary actions (proper awareness building) to make the fish available for consumption by females and girl children in equal quantity to the males of households in rural and poor society.

Acknowledgement

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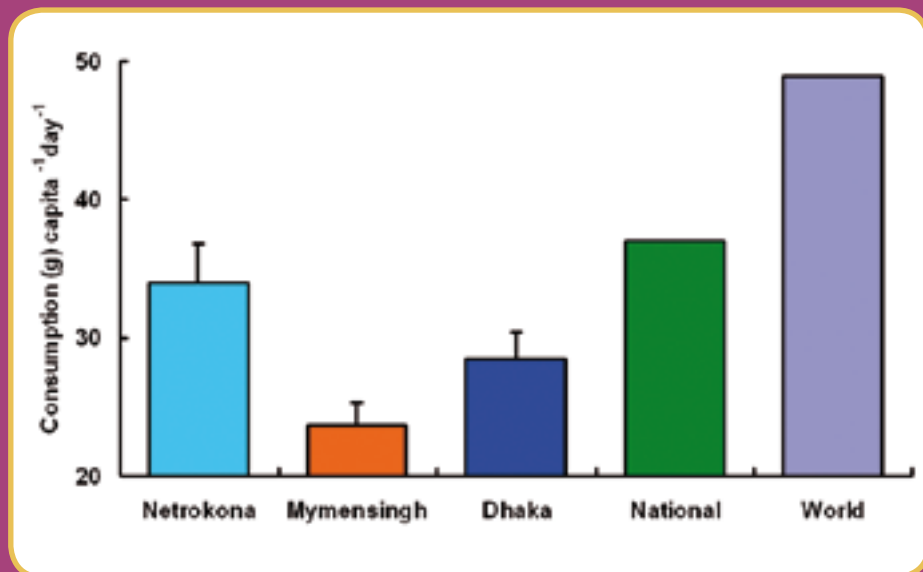


Fig. 2. Average fish consumption (g) per capita, per day in three surveyed areas along with national average and international standard fish requirement (national average and international requirement after DoF 2002)